



## **Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks**

Region One  
490 North Meridian Rd.  
Kalispell, MT 59901  
(406) 752-5501  
FAX: 406-257-0349  
Ref:JS039-12  
February 10, 2012

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP), Region One, is seeking public comment for a fee-title acquisition of approximately 438 acres of property located in Sanders County. This parcel is adjacent to the Flathead Indian Reservation and is located about 10 miles southeast of Plains, Montana. The land provides excellent spring, fall, and winter habitat for the Perma-Paradise (Knowles Creek) bighorn sheep herd and mule deer. The southerly aspect of this property contributes to its importance as winter range for these species. The steep cliffs provide critical lambing areas and escape habitat for bighorn sheep. Bighorn sheep also use the property during the summer. The Perma-Paradise bighorn herd has an estimated current population of 300-375 bighorns. Hunter access in HD 124 is very limited. This property provides critical hunting access to land north of the Flathead River and the adjacent Department of Natural Resources land and to the Lolo National Forest. In addition, the land has 1 5/8 miles of Flathead River frontage. This property would be managed similar to other bighorn sheep WMAs in the lower Clark Fork region.

A public hearing will be held Wednesday, February 22, 2012, 6:00-7:00 p.m., at the Sanders County Court House, 1111 Main Street, in Thompson Falls. The draft environmental assessment is out for public review through 5:00 p.m., Monday, March 12, 2012. A copy is enclosed for your review. Please contact FWP Wildlife Biologist Bruce Sterling (406-827-4389 or e-mail to [bsterling@mt.gov](mailto:bsterling@mt.gov)) or Regional Wildlife Program Manager Jim Williams (406-751-4585 or e-mail to [jwilliams@mt.gov](mailto:jwilliams@mt.gov)) with questions or comments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "James R. Satterfield, Jr." The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

James R. Satterfield Jr., Ph.D.  
Regional Supervisor

/ni

Enclosure

- c: \*Governor's Office, Attn: Mike Volesky, PO Box 200801, Helena, MT 59620-0801
- \*Dale Becker, Manager, CSKT Fish & Wildlife Program, PO Box 278, Pablo, MT 59855
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- \*Joe Durglo, CSKT Tribal Chair, PO Box 278, Pablo, MT 59855
- \*Patricia Hewankorn, Kootenai Culture Committee, PO Box 278, Pablo, MT 59855
- \*Tony Incashola, Salish Culture Committee, PO Box 278, Pablo, MT 59855

\*Ralph Goode, Flathead Reservation Fish & WL Board Chair, PO Box 278, Pablo, MT 59855  
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 \*Montana State Parks Association, PO Box 699, Billings, 59103  
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 \*Rep. Gordon Hendrick, PO Box 262, Superior, 59872  
 \*Rep. Pat Ingraham, PO Box 1151, Thompson Falls, 59873  
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 Sanders County Commissioners, PO Box 519, Thompson Falls, 59873  
 Chuck Hunt, Flathead Wildlife, Inc.  
 Jim Elliott, 100 Trout Creek Road, Trout Creek, 59874  
 Interested Parties

***Full Curl Land Acquisition  
Habitat Conservation Project  
Draft Environmental Assessment***

**February 2012**



**Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks  
490 North Meridian Road  
Kalispell, Montana 59901  
(406) 752-5501**

# **Full Curl Land Acquisition Habitat Conservation Project Draft Environmental Assessment**

**Public Comment Period:** February 10 – March 12, 2012

**Public Hearing:** Wednesday, February 22, 2012, 6:00-7:00 p.m.  
Sanders County Courthouse, 1111 Main Street,  
Thompson Falls, MT

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## INTRODUCTION

This approximately 438-acre parcel is adjacent to the Flathead Indian Reservation, has no vehicle access, and is located about 10 miles southeast of Plains, Montana. The land provides excellent spring, fall, and winter habitat for the Perma-Paradise (Knowles Creek) bighorn sheep herd and mule deer. The southerly aspect of this property contributes to its importance as winter range for these species. The steep cliffs provide critical lambing areas and escape habitat for bighorn sheep. The highly nutritious 110-acre field of alfalfa and grass provides critical spring habitat for gravid ewes. Bighorn sheep also use the property during the summer. The Perma-Paradise bighorn herd has an estimated current population of 300-375 bighorns. Hunter access in HD 124 is very limited. This property provides critical hunting access to land north of the Flathead River and the adjacent Department of Natural Resources land and to the Lolo National Forest. In addition, the land has 1 5/8 miles of Flathead River frontage. This property would be managed similar to other bighorn sheep WMAs in the lower Clark Fork region.

The property serves as habitat for black bear and an occasional mountain lion. Several species of hawks and golden eagles have been observed on the property. The numerous cliffs provide ideal nesting habitat for these species. Both peregrine falcons and bald eagles have known nest sites in the immediate vicinity. Black bears use the property in the spring and fall seasons. Many nongame wildlife species, including rattlesnakes, inhabit the property. The scope of native species present adds additional biological value to this unique property.



**The Full Curl project area with Knowles Creek in the distance and one of the critical lambing areas in the foreground.**

The project proposal received tentative approval from the FWP Commission last summer. The project would be funded with money from the Sheep Auction Fund. This fund is derived from the annual auction of a single bighorn sheep permit and annually generates several hundred thousand dollars.

This parcel receives heavy use by bighorn sheep, primarily during the fall, winter, and spring months. Up to 75-125 sheep have been observed on the property. Prior to access being closed by a former property owner, hunters annually took mature full-curl rams and ewes.

The sale of this property to another entity and the possible construction of a home would negatively impact FWP management of this herd and could potentially severely impact the use of this area by bighorn sheep and other wildlife.

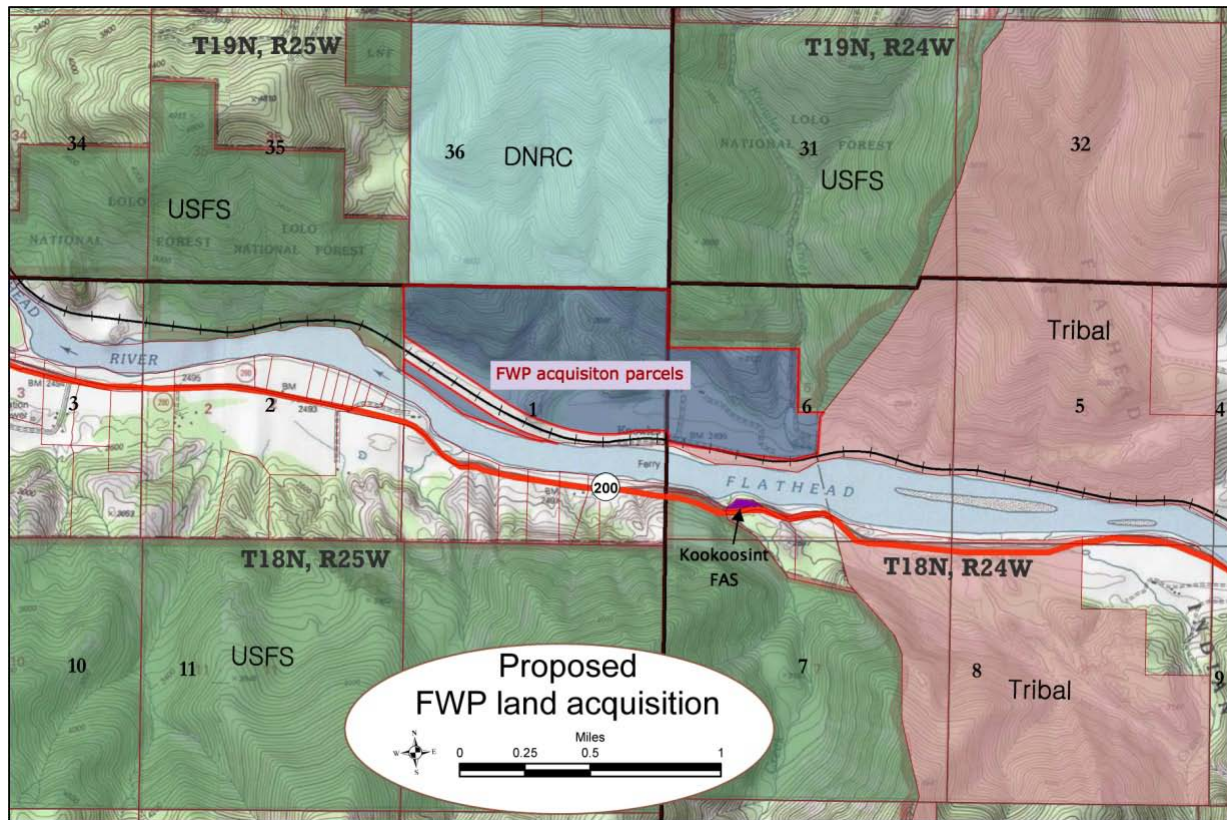
Another concern relative to the sale of this property to another entity is the possible introduction of domestic sheep, whether as a hobby or for commercial purposes. Domestic sheep commonly carry a *Pasteurella* bacterium that is harmless to them. However, through simple nose-to-nose contact with wild sheep, this bacterium can be easily transmitted to wild herds with devastating effects. Entire herds have been pushed to the brink of extinction because of innocuous encounters.

The property contains native bunchgrass benches, hillsides, and brushy draws. The bunchgrass species include bluebunch wheatgrass, Idaho fescue, and rough fescue. Brush species such as serviceberry and chokecherry can be found on the property. Tree species primarily include Douglas-fir and ponderosa pine. Some of the ponderosa pine may be more than a century old. Black cottonwood trees can be found along the banks of the Flathead River. The grass in the hay field appears to be a variety of brome species.





Pair of swans fly by the proposed Full Curl Wildlife Management Area.



**Figure 1. Map showing the location of Full Curl property boundary with Department of Natural Resources land and Lolo National Forest on the north and west and Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribal land to the east. The Flathead River is located to the south.**

## **PROJECT PROXIMITY to EXISTING WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREAS**

The Lolo National Forest and Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) lands border the 438-acre project area on the north and west. Three additional bighorn sheep wildlife management areas (WMAs) are located approximately 18-30 miles northwest of the project. The 1,500-acre Mount Silcox WMA, the Sheep Viewing WMA, and the Roundhorn WMA are all managed primarily for the benefit of bighorn sheep and other wildlife. These bighorn sheep properties anchor the bighorn sheep seasonal migrations to winter range.

## **DETAILED PROJECT DESCRIPTIONS**

### **Habitat/Recreation Values:**

All area WMAs provide important wintering habitat for large numbers of elk, mule deer, and bighorn sheep, which migrate to these areas from a much broader area. In addition,



they are very popular areas for hunters in the fall who are pursuing these and other species. Other recreationists visit the WMAs to view and photograph wildlife, hike, bird watch, and enjoy the panoramic view of the Lower Clark Fork Valley. The WMAs are available for public use from May 15 to December 1. Most WMAs are closed the remainder of the year to allow wildlife an opportunity to use the areas undisturbed. The Full Curl property will augment the WMAs by providing important fall, winter, and spring habitat for the Perma-Paradise bighorn sheep herd.

In addition, two fishing access sites (FAS) are located in the immediate vicinity of the property. The KooKooSint FAS is located on the south bank of the river directly across from the proposed acquisition and the Pair-of-Dice FAS is located about 4 miles downstream. These sites provide excellent boating access to the Full Curl property.



Black Cottonwoods located on the Full Curl property.

**Location/Ownership:**

The project is located in Sanders County in Section 1, Township 18 North, Range 25 West, and Section 6, Township 18 North, Range 24 West. It is located approximately 10

miles southeast of Plains on the north side of the Flathead River. The property is currently owned by Glacier Bank. The land has no vehicle access. On wildlife lands, FWP, by statute, will pay the county in which the land resides "a sum equal to the amount of taxes which would be payable on county assessment of the property were it taxable to a private citizen." Montana Code (84-1-603).

### **Costs/Funding Sources:**

The FWP Commission approved this project on a tentative basis last summer. Funding for the acquisition would come from the Bighorn Sheep Auction Fund. This fund is derived from the auction of a single Montana bighorn sheep permit annually and may generate several hundred thousand dollars. The cost for acquiring the 438-acre Full Curl property is approximately \$425,000. Costs for future management of the area are expected to be minimal and will probably average less than \$500-\$1,000 per year.

### **Bighorn Sheep:**

Most herds of bighorns in northwest Montana are the result of transplants from the Sun River herd. Examples include sheep on Wild Horse Island, Thompson Falls, Saint Regis Cutoff, the Kootenai Falls herd, and the Cabinet Mountains herd. The Perma-Paradise herd consists of about 300-375 sheep and range from the Perma Bridge to Henry Creek. This herd annually produces rams that measure in excess of 180 inches, with some exceeding 190 inches.

Bighorn sheep were historically present in the Lower Clark Fork River Valley and documented by explorers, fur trappers, and various authors in the early 1800s. By the 1900s, these sheep were greatly reduced in numbers, and by 1948 no sheep were known to exist around Thompson Falls. Reduction can be attributed to indiscriminate hunting and disease outbreaks introduced by domestic sheep, the latter being the most likely cause for the ultimate die-off in the mid 1940s. Bighorn sheep were reintroduced into the Perma-Paradise area in 1979 with transplants of 14 sheep from the Wild Horse Island herd (9 ewes and 5 rams).

### **Proposed Management Plan:**

The Full Curl property will become part of the local bighorn sheep Wildlife Management Areas and managed similarly to the rest of the WMAs to provide and protect habitat for a diversity of wildlife species. Little is expected to change from the current management of this area. Weeds will continue to be monitored and will be sprayed if necessary. The emphasis will be on maintaining the quality of the area for bighorn sheep. The pasture should be retained as this provides an important feeding area for wildlife. The property presents some very unique access and management challenges since there is no vehicle access onto the property. Equipment must be moved via boat or barge. FWP manages and owns the FAS just across the Flathead River, so boat access will be no problem.



Knowles Creek is located on the east end of the property.





The Full Curl property looking east with the Flathead River in the foreground.

## **DISCUSSION OF ALTERNATIVES**

### **Alternative A – Proposed Action: Complete Fee Title Acquisition**

FWP would acquire the 438-acre Full Curl property located in Sanders County. Through fee-title ownership, FWP would have the opportunity to maintain the habitat quality of the area and minimize the potential for future conflicts, should the area be subdivided. Recreational opportunities for the public would also be maximized. FWP would manage weeds and provide public access areas. Alternative A compliments FWP's management goals for the Perma-Paradise bighorn sheep herd as well as to provide and maintain habitats for a variety of wildlife and for a variety of compatible public uses.



## **Alternative B – No Action**

FWP would not acquire the Full Curl property. This would likely result in the property being sold and developed, possibly with one new residence. Wildlife use would likely decrease and potential conflicts with wildlife and wildlife management would increase.

## **Description of Area Related to Indirect or Cumulative Effects**

The proposed project is in the vicinity of three additional bighorn sheep Wildlife Management Areas. They all provide important winter range for a variety of species (primarily bighorn sheep) that migrate to the area. This project would complement the WMAs and other habitat conservation efforts that are currently present in the Lower Clark Fork River Valley. There has been strong public support for these efforts in the past.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS**

This section of the environmental assessment presents an evaluation of the impacts of the alternatives, including secondary and cumulative impacts on the physical and human environment.

## **PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT**

### **Land Resources:**

**Alternative A:** The area would continue to provide important habitat for a variety of species. Soils would remain undisturbed.

**Alternative B:** Under the no-action alternative the property could be subdivided and/or developed for residential or commercial uses. Roads may be constructed on the property, which could lead to runoff, soil disturbance, and the introduction of noxious weeds. The pasture may not be maintained.

### **Air Quality:**

**Alternative A:** Under the proposed action, land use would be the protection of native habitat and would help insure pristine air quality. No activities would occur that could negatively affect future long-term air quality of this area.

**Alternative B:** No action would allow for land uses other than habitat protection and wildlife management. Negative impacts to current air quality in the project area could occur, especially if the area is developed for commercial purposes.

### **Water:**

**Alternative A:** Under the proposed action, water quality would receive the highest level of protection. If noxious weed spraying occurs, protection of water quality will be of extreme importance.

**Alternative B:** Under the no-action alternative, the quality and quantity of water could be impacted by residential or commercial development due to runoff, leaching from septic systems, fertilizers and pesticides applied to lawns, etc.

### **Vegetation:**

**Alternative A:** The proposed alternative would maintain the diversity, quantity, and quality of native vegetation in the project area.

**Alternative B:** Under the no-action alternative, residential or commercial use of the land could drastically alter or eliminate current vegetative communities.

### **Fish and Wildlife:**

**Alternative A:** Acquisition of the property by FWP will result in the continued maintenance and protection of habitat that is already being used by a wide variety of species, especially bighorn sheep.

**Alternative B:** The no-action alternative could allow future residential or commercial development. If that occurred, development activities could severely impact the habitat with potentially significant and far-reaching effects. One example would be the introduction of domestic sheep and/or domestic goats to this parcel. Simple nose-to-nose contact with wild sheep could result in the transmission of a *Pasteurella* bacterium that could devastate the entire Perma-Paradise herd. While most domestic sheep and goats carry this bacterium and are resistant to its effects, wild sheep are highly susceptible.

## **HUMAN ENVIRONMENT**

### **Noise/Electrical Effects:**

**Alternative A:** This proposed project would not have any effect on noise or cause any electrical disturbance.

**Alternative B:** No action would mean that current noise or electrical levels could drastically change in the future.

### **Land Use:**

**Alternative A:** Acquisition of this property by FWP would result in no change from the current land use, which is largely a pristine environment.

**Alternative B:** No action would mean that current land uses could change drastically in the future.

### **Risk/Health Hazards:**

**Alternative A:** The proposed action includes the potential for the occasional use of chemicals for noxious weed control. Herbicides would only be applied by a licensed applicator following label instructions and taking all precautions to prevent any accidental discharge or misuse.

**Alternative B:** No action would result in whatever health risks commensurate with development of the site.

### **Community Impact:**

**Alternative A:** The proposed action will maintain critical wildlife habitat on 438 acres in Sanders County. The public will have access to the area 6½ months each year for hunting, wildlife viewing, or photography. People in Sanders County view wildlife, especially bighorn sheep, as an important public resource. Maintaining this area in its natural state will help preserve important scenic values. These benefits are difficult to quantify, but are undoubtedly important to the area's increasing tourism industry. The benefits of open lands will increase as residential development encompasses more and more rural lands. See the attached Socio-Economic Review (Appendix A) for further detail.

**Alternative B:** The no-action alternative would allow the area to be developed. While this would undoubtedly provide some revenue to the county and community in the form of new home construction and taxes, it could also result in increased costs to the county for police and fire protection, etc.

### **Public Services:**

**Alternative A:** The purchase of the property includes a requirement by the state to pay in-lieu-of taxes on the land equal to previous tax values. On wildlife lands, FWP will pay to the county in which the land resides "a sum equal to the amount of taxes which would be payable on county assessment of the property were it taxable to a private citizen." Montana Code (84-1-603). The state will not require any new services.

**Alternative B:** No action means that the land could be developed, resulting in increased public service requirements.

**Aesthetics/Recreation:**

**Alternative A:** Purchase of the 438 acres by FWP would preserve the aesthetic beauty of the area and maintain or increase existing public recreational opportunities. Existing open space available to the public would be maintained.

**Alternative B:** No action means that the current aesthetic and recreational values of the property would likely decrease in the future.

**Cultural/Historic Resources:**

**Alternative A:** No known historical or cultural resources exist on the property. If resources are discovered at a later date, they will be protected by the best possible means.

**Alternative B:** No action means that there could be a higher level of risk to cultural or historical resources if the area is developed.

**Summary Evaluation of Significance:**

Based upon evaluation of potential impacts related to the proposal, a determination has been made that an EIS is not required. The EA is an appropriate level of analysis for the proposed action because: 1) no endangered or threatened plant or animal species will be significantly affected, 2) there are no long-term or irretrievable impacts to the physical environment, and 3) there are no negative impacts to the human environment.

**List of Agencies Consulted During Preparation of the EA:** None

**Public Involvement:**

The Region and FWP have received considerable support for the proposal during project exploration and development. There will be a 30-day public comment period, February 10 to March 12, 2012. The Region will make the EA available to interested individuals, groups, and agencies, and will facilitate a public hearing on Wednesday, February 22, 2012, from 6:00 to 7:00 p.m. at the Sanders County Courthouse, 1111 Main Street, Thompson Falls, Montana, to discuss the proposal and receive public comment. Please direct comments/questions to Bruce Sterling, FWP Area Wildlife Biologist, (406) 827-4389 or e-mail to [bsterling@mt.gov](mailto:bsterling@mt.gov), or Jim Williams, FWP Wildlife Program Manager, (406) 752-5501 or e-mail to [jiwilliams@mt.gov](mailto:jiwilliams@mt.gov).

**Cost:**

The negotiated price of the 438-acre property is \$425,000.

**FULL CURL PROPERTY  
FEE TITLE ACQUISITION  
SOCIOECONOMIC ASSESSMENT**

**MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS**

Prepared by:

Rob Brooks  
FWP  
February 2012



## **I. INTRODUCTION**

House Bill 526, passed by the 1987 Legislature (MCA 87-1-241 and MCA 87-1-242), authorizes Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) to acquire an interest in land for the purpose of protecting and improving wildlife habitat. These acquisitions can be through fee title, conservation easements, or leasing. In 1989, the Montana legislature passed House Bill 720 requiring that a socioeconomic assessment be completed when wildlife habitat is acquired using Habitat Montana monies. These assessments evaluate the significant social and economic impacts of the purchase on local governments, employment, schools, and impacts on local businesses.

This socioeconomic evaluation addresses the fee title transfer of the Full Curl property to FWP using funding provided by the Sheep Auction Fund. The report addresses the physical and institutional setting as well as the social and economic impacts associated with the proposed fee title acquisition.

## **II. PHYSICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SETTING**

### **A. Property Description**

The Full Curl property is located in Sanders County about 10 miles southeast of Plains. This 438-acre property is surrounded on three sides by public land administered by the Lolo National Forest and Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. A detailed description of this property is included in the environmental assessment (EA).

### **B. Habitat and Wildlife Populations**

The property is a mixture of grasslands and forest habitat and varies from gentle-to-steep topography. This property provides important habitat for a large number of wildlife species, primarily bighorn sheep, both seasonally and year-round. The EA provides a list of the species that utilize this property.

### **C. Current Use**

The property has been managed as a private ranch for its hay, timber, and wildlife values.

### **D. Management Alternatives**

- 1) Purchase the property fee title
- 2) No purchase

## **MFWP Fee Title Purchase**

The intent of the Full Curl land purchase is to protect the wildlife habitats found here as well as protect the integrity of the surrounding areas.

## **No Purchase Alternative**

The no purchase alternative requires some assumptions since use and management of the property will vary depending on what future owners decide to do with the property. There is potential for subdivision of these acres, which would most likely impact the use patterns of the wildlife, especially the bighorn sheep since they use the area for escape and lambing cover.

## **III. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS**

Section II identifies the management alternatives this report addresses. The fee title purchase will provide long-term protection of important wildlife habitat and consistent management of this land. Section III quantifies the social and economic consequences of the two management alternatives following two basic accounting stances: financial and local area impacts.

Financial impacts address the cost of the fee title transfer to MFWP and discuss the impacts on tax revenues to local government agencies, including school districts.

Expenditure data associated with the use of the property provides information for analyzing the impacts these expenditures may have on local businesses (i.e., income and employment).

### **A. Financial Impacts**

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks has agreed to purchase fee title to this property for \$425,000 with funding provided by the Sheep Auction Fund. These lands will be managed as part of the Department's Wildlife Management Areas, and the management costs are estimated to be approximately \$500-\$1,000 per year.

The financial impacts to local governments are the potential changes in tax revenues resulting from the fee title purchase. The sale of this land and subsequent title transfer to MFWP will not change the tax revenues that Sanders County currently collects on this property. MFWP is required by Montana Code 87-1-603 to pay "to the county a sum equal to the amount of taxes which would be payable on county assessment of the property were it taxable to a private citizen." Current taxes on this land amount to approximately \$857.57 per year.

## **B. Economic Impacts**

There will not be any significant financial impacts to local businesses associated with the fee title purchase of this land and subsequent ownership by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. The agency does not plan to change management practices on these acres.

## **IV. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS**

The fee title purchase and title transfer to Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks will provide long term protection for the habitat and wildlife, maintain the open space integrity of the land, and enhance public recreational opportunities. The fee title purchase and title transfer to MFWP will not cause a reduction in tax revenues on this property from their current levels to Sanders County under Montana Code 87-1-603. Overall financial impacts to local business will be minimal in terms of the agricultural and timber activities